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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a study of ethical decision making by teachers and the application of resulting case studies to teacher education. The initial study examined ethical decision making and the professional ethical philosophy of 18 elementary, middle and secondary teachers from urban, small town and rural areas of Montana. Case studies of the experiences described by these subjects were prepared, and the resulting cases were used in the college classroom to prepare elementary education students for ethical decision making. The usefulness and accuracy of the case studies were evaluated by 34 in-service teachers. As a result of these activities, it is recommended that Montana Program Standards leading to certification of teachers be strengthened in the area of professional ethics, that thoughtful application of the code of ethics be emphasized in teacher training, and that instruction in education coursework include the use of case studies on applied ethics. Three appendices contain the letter of invitation to participate in the project; a table showing teachers interviewed by size and level of school, gender, and grade or subject taught; and the interview questions. (JPB)

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Professional Ethics Among Practicing Educators

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

A Report Prepared for the Certification Standards and Practices Advisory Council
April 18, 1996
Missoula, Montana

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Introduction

The study of applied ethics is a crucial element in the preparation and continued development of professional educators. Formal course work as well as clinical experiences provide opportunities for pre-service teachers to reflect on the ethical questions they will soon face. Few methods are as effective in this preparation as the use of realistic case studies in which teachers face ethical questions and must choose some course of action. This project was therefore designed to improve the preparation of teachers by studying ethical situations and the actions teachers take to resolve them.

Background

Professional ethics is the application of an individual's ultimate concerns about human conduct to their professional lives. It is a concern with how the professional's actions affect others, especially those within their client groups, and with how the client groups' interests should be taken into account. To the degree that these values are also found in a public set of laws or a profession's code of behavior, they are reinforced and possibly enforceable.

In the practice of their profession, educators recognize their responsibility to serve the needs of their most important client group, children and youth. In deciding what action they ought to take, teachers confront interests that are often in conflict with each other. For example, the welfare of the school community is often at odds with individual student needs. As well, teachers face a wide range of complicated ethical issues including confidentiality, parents' rights, and equitable treatment of students. To make sound ethical judgments, teachers must develop ways of thinking that combine their intuitive

beliefs about ethical action with shared principles of ethical theory and consider how they will apply such principles in their professional lives. Ethical decision making for a teacher must become an integral part of their professional life. (See Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik and Strike and Ternasky for a broader discussion on applied ethics for educators.)

A fundamental tool in the analysis of professional ethics is the case study. Used increasingly in teacher preparation programs, the case study offers excellent opportunities to show real people struggling with important issues. (See Cooper, Wasserman, and Silverman, et al for current examples.) In a well-designed case study, a pre-service or in-service professional is immersed in a realistic problem, investigates key issues and practical considerations, develops solutions by applying ethical principles, and prepares to accept responsibility for a decision.

As useful as case studies are, there are a number of problems my students and I have identified that are common to the available case studies on the ethics of education. The first problem that limits the pedagogical usefulness of many case studies is their lack of realism. They are packed with as many problems as possible and tend to read like bad novels. Everything that might go wrong, does. Rarely are cases portrayed in terms of the common problems teachers might face many times during a day. So unrealistic are most cases that they almost never include a teacher or administrator actually responding to the problem.

Case studies also limit their usefulness when they fail to pay adequate attention to the parents, colleagues, school board members, and administrators who are often involved in everyday ethical situations. While a teacher's major focus in ethical decision making is on

the students, the adults involved in the educational process play an important role as well. Lastly, few case studies are written with the special needs of primary and middle school teachers and students in mind.

Unrealistic, irrelevant case studies generally result in teacher education students failing to learn very much from the approach. They enjoy the lively, active discussion that takes place in the classroom, but they don't take the cases as seriously as they might. They do not get the full benefit of the case study methods which is using "virtual reality" to help prepare professional to think critically about their actions and to assume responsibility for their decisions.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to formulate a set of realistic ethics case studies based on interviews with selected western Montana teachers. It is hoped that these case studies, with accompanying analysis, might be used to improve the quality of instruction on applied ethics for both pre-service and in-service teachers throughout the state. A second purpose was to make recommendations for strengthening the professional ethics component in Montana's teacher education program standards.

Teacher Interviews

This project attempted to address the deficiencies of available case studies by collecting information regarding everyday ethical situations and the actions teachers take to resolve them. Toward that end, I began my study by identifying a group of teachers who fit my requirements for the interview pool: represent both veteran and novice teachers; include elementary, middle, and secondary schools; and teach in a variety of sizes of western

Montana schools. In addition, I chose only teachers who had completed either my undergraduate or graduate courses in ethics at UM because of their familiarity with applied ethics as I taught it. The initial pool included 35 teachers.

My goal was to interview two teachers at each level, elementary, middle, and secondary, from schools considered to be urban (Class AA), small town (Class A and B), and rural (Class C), for a total of 18 teachers. I contacted sets of teachers to determine their willingness to participate. I sent these teachers a brief but specific letter about the project, stressing confidentiality for those interviewed. (See Appendix A for a copy of the letter.) Sixteen teachers agreed to be interviewed. This group of teachers included nine women and seven men; six elementary teachers, three middle school teachers, and seven high school teachers (with some overlap of middle and high school teachers); one teacher with a physical disability; and two teachers from racial minority groups. Four of the teachers work at schools located on the Flathead Reservation and one school was non-public. (See Appendix B for the range of teachers interviewed, including size and level of school, gender, and grade level or subject taught.)

In scheduling the interviews, twelve teachers chose their classroom as the interview site; two preferred to meet in my UM office; one was a telephone interview; and one chose to meet in his home. The interviews generally lasted between one-and-a-half to two hours. All but two of the interviews were audio-taped and the same individual transcribed all of the tapes.

In each interview, I used a standard set of questions to focus the teacher's comments but I made no attempt to make certain each question was answered by all interviewees.

(See Appendix C for a list of these questions.) I asked clarifying questions to try to understand the situation the teacher was describing. I wanted the teachers to feel free to re-tell a situation as honestly and in as much detail as possible. The interviews might have gone on longer, but for lack of time.

Results

Once the interviews and transcriptions were completed, I began the task of writing formal case studies. Early on, I decided to use first person, rather than the more typical third person narrative found in case studies. I did this in an effort to personalize the situation and make the action taken by the teacher as realistic as possible. As I began writing the case studies, I reflected on how useful the individual interviews had been. I have done survey research on ethical decision making and, of course, found it lacking in richness of detail. The in-person interviews provided me with information that would be unlikely through an anonymous questionnaire alone. The length of time spent individually with the teachers as well as the degree of trust our previous association had developed made significant differences in the quality of information I gathered during each interview. The teachers' own words convey the careful deliberation they give to everyday ethical questions. Their insights will make the case studies compelling teaching and learning tools.

In writing each case study, I changed only minor details in order to prevent identification of the teacher or anyone associated with the case. None of the facts have been combined to make a totally new case. I have added reasonable details to help explain the situation as well as possible. In most cases, I have included the teacher's action as part

of the case. In others, I have separated the situation from the action taken for teaching purposes. In all cases, however, the teacher is shown taking some kind of action. The determination of whether the action is ethical or not is then taken up by those studying the case. To date, seven case studies are completed and have been used with in-service and pre-service teachers; four more are in draft form. I estimate I have information from the teacher interviews to write several additional cases. (See Appendix D for the completed cases.)

During the Fall 1995 and Spring 1996 semesters, I used these cases with 105 pre-service students enrolled in C&I 407 Ethics and Policy Issues on the UM campus. Elementary education students focused on the elementary cases and secondary certification students focused on the secondary cases. In small groups and as a class, we considered the issues and practical considerations relevant to each case and analyzed the decision each teacher made. We attempted to apply the Montana Code of Ethics, the National Education Association's Code of Ethics, and a variety of moral theories to each case. The students were more interested in these "local" cases than those that appear in our textbook, The Ethics of Teaching, by Kenneth Strike and Jonas Soltis. They appreciated the fact that the teachers in these cases actually made decisions and then offered the ethical basis for their actions. Following the use of the more authentic cases, it has become difficult to have my students take seriously the cases in the Strike and Soltis text. They demand more study of the cases that show a resolution to an ethical case, not, I think, because they only want the "right" answer, but because they can compare their own resolution of a difficult situation with the way a first-year or twenty-year teacher

does. I anticipate ceasing use of the Strike and Soltis text in my classes on applied ethics in the future.

My proposed next task was to complete workshops with in-service teachers regarding applied ethics. I was not as successful in this regard as I had hoped. I was unable to present a workshop at the 1995 MEA conference and school districts had already set their professional development schedules when I contacted several districts. Not wanting to give up this part of the project entirely, I was able to try out some of my cases with a total of 34 in-service teachers. These individuals teach in Florence-Carleton, Helena, East Helena, and Martin City Schools. Most were students in a graduate class I taught during Fall 1995; I made personal contacts and drafted others as volunteers for an after-school workshop. The in-service teachers reviewed selected cases and offered valuable information regarding practical aspects of each case. They were not surprised by the topics of the cases, finding them quite realistic, but they mused about how they would have done things differently. What I found especially encouraging and useful to my own teaching of applied ethics was their suggestions for preventing ethical dilemmas where possible, something I always stress with pre-service teachers. In an effort to meet my original goals for this project, I have submitted a proposal to offer an applied ethics workshop at the 1996 MEA conference and am scheduled to teach a graduate applied ethics seminar during Summer 1996 on the UM campus.

I have much fine-tuning of these cases to do; both pre-service and in-service teachers have given valuable suggestions about how to make these cases as useful as possible. However, my task of writing realistic cases showing teachers making decisions has

succeeded beyond my expectations. My pre-service students show evidence of stronger analysis of ethical decision making, particularly in their ability to view decisions from the varying point of view of everyone involved, not just the teacher.

This project has prompted changes is my own thinking about applied ethics as well. After interviewing these teachers and hearing how they make daily ethical decisions, I now find some of the moral theory upon which I had previously based our in-class analysis of ethical dilemmas somewhat lacking. I believe that I have been relying too heavily on the formal philosophical theories of ethics and not sufficiently on more practical criteria. I am not yet certain what those criteria should be but I see now how limiting strict attention to moral theory can be when working in applied ethics.

The case studies I have written so far suggest that there are other ways of explaining the everyday ethical decision making of educators. One that holds particular promise is an investigation of the virtuous teacher. What contemporary virtues are most appropriate to educators? Ethicists working in disciplines other than education, such as William May, have suggested lists of modern virtues for practitioners that may perhaps provide a more useful approach than abstract moral theories. This project has encouraged me to ask what a list of modern virtues for educators might include. I look forward to addressing this question, using the case studies I have been able to create from the teacher interviews.

Recommendations

As a result of the activities involved in completing this project, I offer the following recommendations:

1. The Montana Program Standards leading to certification/licensure of teachers pertaining to professional ethics should be strengthened. An approved teacher certification program should require knowledge of the process of ethical decision making; ability to apply ethical principles, especially those found in the Montana Code of Ethics, in everyday school settings; and wilingness to assume responsibility for their decisions.
2. The thoughtful application of the Montana Code of Ethics by educators should be emphasized by all groups and agencies who play a role in the professional development of pre-service and in-service educators. The document should be one with which all teachers are familiar and able to put into practice.
3. Instruction in professional education course work at public and non-public institutions that prepare teachers should include the use of case studies on applied ethics.

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Appendices

The University of Montana

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January 22, 1995

Dear

I have begun work on a research project on professional ethics through a grant funded by the Montana State Board of Public Education. The project includes interviews with selected teachers in western Montana concerning the everyday ethical decisions they make. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to be a participant in this research.

"Professional Ethics Among Practicing Educators" is a project designed to improve the quality of instruction Montana teachers receive concerning professional ethics and to improve the professional ethics component contained in Montana teacher education standards. I will use the information obtained in the teacher interviews to make recommendations concerning revisions to the State Board of Public Education and to write about professional ethics.

Your role in the project will be to describe examples of situations in which you felt an ethical question was involved, and to tell me what you or others did to resolve the situation or prevent it from occurring again. With your permission, I will take notes and tape-record our conversation. The interviews will last approximately an hour and a half and will be at your school or other appropriate location. All specific information obtained during the interview will be held in confidence; individuals and schools will not be identified.

In organizing this research, I identified two teachers at each level, elementary, middle, and secondary from schools considered to be urban, small town, and rural, for a total of 18 teachers. The teachers, both novice and veteran, are all former students of mine in either undergraduate or graduate courses on professional ethics.

I am eager to visit you in your school setting and begin our conversation about ethics. I will contact you by telephone in the coming weeks to inquire whether you are able to participate in the project and, if so, to schedule a meeting. If you prefer, please contact me using the post card enclosed, telephoning at 243-5054 (voice mail), or through e-mail (JeanL @selway.umt.edu). Please indicate a suitable time at which I may reach you. I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,

Jean Luckowski

An Equal Opportunity University

Teachers interviewed, by size and level of school, gender, and grade or subject taught

Class AA Elementary Female Kindergarten	Class C High School Male English	Class C High School Male Art	Class A or B High School Male Business Education
Class A or B Middle School Male Social Studies	Class A or B High School Male English	Class AA Elementary Female 5th grade	Class C Elementary Male 3rd grade
Class AA Middle Female Special Education	Class AA Middle Female Language arts/ social studies	Class AA High School Male Social studies	Class A or B Elementary Female 3rd grade
Class A or B High School Female English	Class A or B Elementary Female 2nd grade	Class A or B Elementary Female 3rd grade	Class AA High School Female Foreign Language

Interview Questions

1. Describe examples of situations in which you think an ethical question was involved. Include relatively common, everyday situations, both in the classroom and related to school in general (e.g. parents' rights, obligation to colleagues, enforcing school rules, professional judgment, equitable treatment of students, confidentiality, teacher's personal life).

2. What did you or someone else do to resolve the situation and why? Is there a fundamental motivating principle behind most of your ethical decisions? What is it?

3. Is one kind of ethical situation more difficult for you to resolve than another? Which kind? Why?

4. Are ethical situations more likely to occur involving students or adults? How does this affect your decision on what to do?

5. In situations concerning students, how does their age or maturity level affect your decision?

6. Assuming that you are acting within legal limits, do you feel the decision in ethical situations is in your hands? What determines whether or not you accept responsibility for ethical decision making? Is it a matter of whether the situation occurs within your classroom or not? If you are not responsible, who is?

7. What do you do that helps you address ethical questions? If possible, how do you prevent these situations from occurring?